

America's kids are more inactive than ever

Walking can make a healthy difference



Young Pedestrians: A daily walk might help combat the rising incidence of childhood obesity in America.

Providing walking places that are safe and accessible for our children can do more than just prevent tragic injuries and deaths. According to Mark Fenton, editor of Boston-based *Walking Magazine*, if children walk regularly, it can also improve their health and set patterns that will carry them into adulthood. "These days, in the age of video games and VCR's, children are heavier and more inactive than ever," said Fenton, who is a member of the "Partnership for a Walkable America" -- a coalition of private, state and federal organizations united together with the common cause of increasing public awareness about the benefits of walking.

"We're essentially socializing kids to be inactive he said. "Kids naturally want to be active. They run around and squeal and make noise and what do we do when we start them in school? One of the first things we say is 'Sit down and don't stand up or wiggle unless you're called upon. Only run around during recess or gym.' Then in life, as they get older, we only ask them to move around *less*."

"The fundamental absurdity is that when schools are low on money, what's the first thing they cut?" Fenton asked. "Physical education and sports," he said, answering his own question. "Well I understand that outfitting a football team is costly, but interestingly enough, taking kids for a walk costs nothing," he said. "If you did institute a walking program in the schools, you could have the walks be part of biology class or sociology class where the kids could look at their communities."

Inactive Lifestyles May Begin In Youth

Obesity is a problem in the United States, according to the National Center for Health Statistics.

According to their data, about one in every three Americans, ages 35 through 45, was obese, as of 1991. The scary part is that this figure is 36 percent higher than it was in 1962.

"This obesity seems to be related to physical inactivity," Fenton said, and the seeds of the problem we're seeing may well be sown in youth."

If the "Youth Risk Behavior Survey" conducted in 1990 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta (CDC) is any indication, that may well be the case. The results from this survey indicate that teens spend more time watching television than they do exercising.

CDC, which is a member of the Partnership for a Walkable America, surveyed 11,631 U.S. high school students, grades nine through 12, and found that just 12.37 percent of the students engaged in 20 minutes of vigorous physical activity three or more times a week.

By contrast, about 70 percent of the students surveyed said they watched at least an hour of television every school day. About 35 percent of those surveyed said they watched 3 hours or more of television on each school day.

The survey also found that 43.7 percent of the boys and 52 percent of the girls were not even enrolled in a physical education class.

This inactivity has had repercussions on America's kids, said Dr. Michael Pratt, of CDC.

"There was a huge increase in childhood obesity between 1980 and 1990," said Dr. Pratt, who is the acting chief for the Physical Activity and Health Branch in the Division of Nutrition and Physical Activity at CDC.

"Childhood obesity had been relatively stable through the 1960s and 1970s but now it has become a really critical problem," he said.

Dr. Pratt attributed the rising number of overweight kids to the increasing amount of high-calorie junk foods kids ingest as well as to the overall decrease in physical activity among children.

"Physical education classes are getting fewer and farther between," Dr. Pratt said. "Illinois is now the only state that has mandatory physical education classes for kids grades kindergarten through 12.

The problem is so alarming that this year, CDC joined forces with doctors and researchers from across the United States to form "The Physical Activity and Nutrition Program for Adolescents" -- known as the "PAN" program. In coordinating this program, CDC is working in conjunction with Emory University's Nutrition and Health Sciences Center, the International Life Sciences Institute and the National Foundation for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"The PAN program is a public/private partnership whose goal is to get at the underlying reasons behind why there is such a problem with adolescent obesity and then develop interventions to combat the problem," Dr. Pratt said.

Exercise (Including Walking) Can Improve Health

According to Fenton, it is not just American children and adolescents who are inactive. Fenton says that adults in the United States are more sedentary than ever as well.

"Americans are less active than they ever have been," he said. "Twenty-five percent of our population is essentially sedentary 55 percent are only sporadically active and only about 10 percent of the population exercises regularly."

This lack of exercise is killing us, say researchers at the CDC and the American College of Sports Medicine. According to a joint statement they issued this year, approximately 250,000 deaths a year in the United States can be attributed to physical inactivity.

The good news from these organizations is that 30 minutes daily of moderate exercise can promote long-term health.

"Walking is a good way to get that exercise," Fenton said. "There are dozens of ways that a 30-minute walk can be fit into your day. It doesn't have to be putting on lycra tights and going out and doing power walking."

"We encourage people to make a walk part of their daily life -- to intentionally keep a post office box and walk down there to get the mail, or walk to the video store or to the place where you get your milk or newspaper," he said.

And kids? How do we get them to walk more?

"Role modeling is a very important thing," Fenton said. "If you're the kind of parent who actually suggests to their kid that you need not drive the car everywhere and that maybe they could walk back from band rehearsal with a couple of friends instead of you going to get them, that can help set the tone a lot."

Start A School Walking Program

Fenton also suggested parents in neighborhoods join together and approach their schools about starting a walking program. He said parents could even organize a "Walk to School" week with different parents from the neighborhood volunteering to be a little late for work one day so as to serve as a volunteer crossing guard in their community for the event.

He added that local police could come into the school the week before the program to talk to the kids about pedestrian safety and that the students could make posters announcing the event to hang in their community.

"The point is, there's a lot that parents and schools can do," Fenton said. "A parent can walk into a school and say, 'I'd like to lead a walk and if it's a well-thought-out program, they'd be delighted.'"

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